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Roger Dingman. *Ghost of War: The Sinking of the Awa Maru and Japanese-American Relations, 1945-1995.* Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1997. xi + 373 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55750-159-2.

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THE GHOST SHIP OF WORLD WAR II: A SYMBOL OF JAPAN'S SENSE OF VICTIMIZATION

Roger Dingman's book, a story of an American submarine's sinking of a Japanese passenger-cargo ship that was promised safe passage, is the history of a wartime mistake and its far-reaching consequences. As a war commentary, the book is another reminder that armed conflict is fraught with complexities that often lead to human error and miscalculations. At a deeper level, the book is a cross-cultural lesson on how a single event can be simultaneously infused with different meanings.

It was April 1, 1945, an apparently foggy night off the coast of China. The *Awa maru*, a Japanese passenger cargo-ship returning from having delivered Red Cross packages to American prisoners, was crossing the Taiwan Strait under an American guarantee of safe passage. The *Queenfish*, an American submarine on its fourth combat patrol, lurked under the surface and by radar identified what appeared to be a Japanese destroyer. Torpedoes were fired with all four scoring a direct hit. The *Awa maru* was history, but a history that would not soon go away.

The bare facts of what happened have all the marks of sheer disaster. As Dingman explains:

"The *Queenfish*'s kill set a record. Her Mark XVIII-2 torpedoes sent more human beings to their deaths in the depths of the Taiwan Strait than had the single German torpedo that had sunk the SS *Lusitania* off the coast of Ireland nearly thirty years earlier, during World War I. The SS *Titanic* had plunged three-quarters as many victims into the North Atlantic when she struck an iceberg in 1912. Only one other American submarine in the Pacific War up to that point had killed in one blow so many Japanese on board a noncombatant vessel.

"But the *Queenfish*'s victims had been on a ship traveling under an American guarantee of safe passage. The *Awa maru* wore white crosses and was festooned with lights to signify her special character: she was a relief vessel authorized to carry Red Cross packages of food and medicine to American and Allied prisoners and civilian internees in Japanese hands. On that foggy night of 1 April 1945, the ship was homeward bound, traveling along a prearranged course. Word of her protected status and projected course and schedule had been broadcast repeatedly to American submarines.

"In sinking the *Awa maru*, the *Queenfish* committed the 'greatest submarine error in World War II"' (p. 7).

Dingman's *Ghost of War: The Sinking of the* Awa maru *and Japanese-American Relations, 1945-1995* traces how such a shocking event could take place. In the process, it becomes clear that the United States was not totally at fault, even though Tokyo immediately denounced the torpedoing as the "most outrageous act of treachery unparalleled in the world history of the war" (p. 103). How could it have happened? A number of things can be noted: a lapse in communication, the pressures felt by a submarine crew to meet certain expectations in the amount of tonnage sunk, a problem of target misidentification, and the insistence of Japan to exploit the safe passage for the transporting of war contraband.

On that fateful night the *Awa maru* was overloaded with several thousand tons of rubber, twenty-five hundred tons of refined and crude oil, tons of oil drilling machinery, tin ingots, tungsten, and nearly twenty-five hundred "of the best, brightest and most useful officials, technicians, and fighting men from the far reaches of empire" (pp. 44-48). Consequently, the ship rode low in the water, to where on the radar screen it resembled a destroyer or destroyer escort (p. 66). Moreover, when the *Queenfish* detected this ship it was suspiciously racing through the water and not zigzagging to avoid any possible attacks, as if in a hurry to complete a war mission.

The transporting of such contraband and the movement of key personnel was a clear violation of the safe-passage agreement. Furthermore, the *Awa maru* was eleven miles off the prearranged course and eighteen

miles ahead of schedule (p. 84). According to the *Queenfish* crew, it was a foggy night[1] and the *Awa maru* was not blowing its horn, a precaution a ship under safe passage would have normally taken under such circumstances. But all of these details were irrelevant since the submarine crew was not aware that in their patrol area was a Japanese ship under protection status.

The fact remains, the *Queenfish* commander never got the word. Before the submarine began its fourth mission on 9 March 1945, it was docked in Saipan. During that time, its radio operator did not write down the safe-passage message concerning the *Awa maru*, even though it was broadcast on three nights. Upon departure, brought on board the *Queenfish* was a sheaf of classified messages picked up from another submarine berthed nearby. In the pile of papers was the warning about the *Awa maru*, but it never reached the commander and was interpreted by subordinates as "another insignificant message" (p. 64). Later, while the submarine was on its patrol, another message about the *Awa maru* was received but in such an abbreviated form it did not make sense to the crew. It was a lapse in communication that led to the disaster, one that would also result in the submarine commander's court martial. Nonetheless, many Japanese believed it was a purposeful act; and in the process of such thinking, "They ignored one of the grimmest truths that war presents to all who engage in it: the constant threat, real presence, and terrible consequence of human error" (p. 69).

The United States soon admitted to the mistake. "For the first and only time during the war, the U.S. government acknowledged responsibility for the wrongful sinking of a Japanese ship, offered to replace it, and promised full indemnification after the war. That was extraordinary" (p. 101). One reason for the contrition was the fear that Japan would cease distribution of the humanitarian aid and not agree to any more deliveries. All along the American government was aware that Tokyo was not being honest about the relief shipments. One ship could have handled the distribution, but the Japanese government insisted on safe-passage protection for a series of transports. Each shipment was arranged to have many stops along the way, both coming and going. In other words, by delivering American care packages to prisoners and internees the Japanese were at the same time able to safely transport contraband and personnel. This was an important benefit considering that by that time ninety percent of Japan's merchant fleet had been sunk by the U.S. Navy (p. 37).

Washington felt that it had few alternatives for getting humanitarian aid to American and Allied prisoners. As early as 1942 an attempt had been made for the Red Cross to deliver quinine to American prisoners held in the Philippines, but Japan denied the request (p. 13). In 1943 a stockpile of relief aid was sent to the port of Vladivostock, with the hope that Japan would eventually be persuaded to pick it up at what was the neutral Soviet Union (p. 20). That aid sat there until 1944 when Japan finally agreed to an arrangement that would enable it to help resupply its own forces.

Dingman points out that one problem at the onset was a clash of values concerning what was felt to be standard living conditions (p. 11). At the time the average Japanese diet was less than what was found to be acceptable by Americans. Japan determined that prisoners would certainly not be fed any better than its own soldiers who ate pickles, rice, and bits of fish. From the Western perspective, such a diet was inferior. As the war proceeded, camp life got worse. After the war it was learned that prisoners of Japan received one-tenth as much as those held in Europe (p. 113). The sense of American anger over the treatment of its prisoners was perhaps not fully appreciated by the Japanese. After the war the *Awa maru* incident became the first formal negotiation topic of discussion between Washington and Tokyo (p. 121), but from the American point of view it was then determined to be politically unfeasible for the United States to directly provide any compensation after what had been done to its soldiers in the Japanese camps. Japanese officials were pressured to agree to end all claims over the matter. At the time it was argued that American economic aid to Japan would far exceed all *Awa maru* claims. For Japan, it became a symbol of double victimization. For America, an honest mistake of war was more than adequately compensated in the postwar development of Japan.

Dingman's book is an excellent work of scholarship, very thorough and well written. Also, there is fairness and balance in the presentation. Until additional information is forthcoming from the Chinese who in 1975 salvaged the wreckage and returned to Japan some of the remains, it is not likely that there can be a more definitive book on the sinking of the *Awa maru*. But what needs to be considered is more input from the Japanese. Although Dingman draws from several Japanese sources, most seem to be works that are popular in nature. It would be interesting to know the viewpoint of a Japanese counterpart, someone who is a scholar in naval history and at Dingman's level. If *Ghost of War* could be translated and published in Japan, that would create an opportunity for a deeper level of dialogue on this matter.

A question hovers over the discussion. What kind of ghost is the *Awa maru*? Is it *the* ghost of war or simply *a* ghost of war? There is a big difference between the two. The American reader of *Ghost of War* is left with the impression that every person in Japan, up to this present moment, remains bitter about the fate of the *Awa maru*. But is this "ghost of war" something that can be documented, or is it simply the case of Dingman seeing and hearing things after spending too much time in the archives? If indeed the *Awa maru* has become the kind of symbol that the book suggests, then it seems that more Japanese sources could be cited. This is not to say that Japanese sources were not used (many were), but it does question the extent to what those sources represent for the nation as a whole. If the *Awa maru* is a cultural fixation of postwar Japan, then that culture should be saturated with references about it in songs, poems, plays, movies, art work, political speeches, newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, and other forms of public discourse. Furthermore, there should be a *multitude* of anniversary rituals marking the event. If such a reality exists, then that kind of supporting evidence should be made known. If such a reality does not exist, then perhaps the thesis of Dingman's book is constructed on a bit of exaggeration.

A similar criticism can be made regarding the author's interpretation of the *Awa maru* memorial at the temple burial grounds of the Tokugawa Shoguns in Tokyo. The names of the drowning victims have been inscribed on polished black granite walls. According to Dingman, the memorializing of the individuals who died on board the *Awa maru* is a proof that the Japanese people view themselves as the ultimate victims of World War II (p. 179). Whether or not the Japanese believe that they were the victims, it does not make the two *Awa maru* memorials (the one in Tokyo and the other in Nara) any more unique than the war monuments constructed in other countries. Do such monuments attest to the concept of victimization or do they serve as a form of resistance to the processes that would otherwise render war (or an event of a war) an absraction? Remembering individuals is first and foremost humanizing. More would have to be explained in order for Dingman to prove his point about the *Awa maru* memorials. Furthermore, the role of ancestral veneration should certainly be a factor of any such analysis.

One other comment: The author in the future may want to consider the social merits of continuing to refer to ships as "she." Besides the fact that ships are inanimate objects and cannot have gender anyway, it is offensive to some that these vessels which are almost always controlled by men would be designated as female. While it may be a naval tradition to regard a ship as a "she," it is a tradition worthy of being thrown overboard as we sail into the twenty-first century.

Despite the above-mentioned criticisms, Dingman's *Ghost of War* is remarkably well done. Tom Clancy, who is not so versed on complexities, could learn a lot from Dingman.

Notes:

[1]. According to the weather report of 1 April 1945, there was no fog in the Taiwan Strait. See p. 185 of Dingman's book.

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